

I'm Alright on My Own (but with them I'm much better) **by DarkwingDukat (pushingcrazies), pushingcrazies**

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: M/M, Reddie, but I haven't written that far yet, but there are definite hints of Reddie right from the start, it may lean towards poly!losers in the end

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Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

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Summary:

Seven times the Losers helped each other through the most difficult moments in their lives.

Title from "Army" by BOY

1. Bill's Birthday

Author's Note:

I'm most experienced with the bookverse, but I do like the updated timeline from the movieverse, so I've taken elements from both. Most of my characterization and relationships come from the books, for sure.

Thanks to @killersnotmonster for the wonderful beta'ing and encouragement!

Warnings for chapter one: depression, mourning the loss of a child, descriptions of the canon grief Bill's parents go through in the book and how they treat Bill after Georgie's death

Birthdays in the Denbrough house were always a big deal. One of Bill's earliest memories was from his third birthday (he swore it was his second, but his parents insisted he couldn't remember being that young), shoving cake into his mouth with his bare hands as the adults around him laughed. He remembered other kids, too, but not their names or what they looked like. Only the utter joy of their shrieks as they plundered the cake and ransacked his toy chest. He thought one of them was Eddie, who had tripped and scraped his knee, filling the backyard with harrowed sobs until his mother scooped him up and took him away - but then again maybe not. Maybe he only imagined that to be true, a cobbled-together memory based on his current friendship and knowing Eddie so well.

As summer faded, the horrors of the last few months did as well, and soon the leaves began to change. August slipped into a brisk September and school started up once again. Although school was as much a drag as ever, being a September baby had its perks. It softened the blow of having to wake up early again and suffer the inhumanity of the Derry public school system. His birthday didn't fall too close to any major holidays (like Bev's) or outside of the school year, when it was harder to organise a decent party (like Richie's). The only downside, as far as Bill could see, was the fact that Georgie's came so close after his. Had come. Did birthdays continue

to exist after a person was dead?

It would have been Georgie's eighth birthday this year. Bill could remember when he was almost six years old being told his new baby brother would be due right around the same time of his birthday. At first he had thought it would be cool, that it was like getting a special gift just for him. A new baby brother. But the closer it came to his birthday, the more he had realised sharing a birthday would mean sharing everything that made the day so special: presents, parties, cake, friends. The selfish part of his almost-six-year-old brain screamed against the unfairness of having to share any of that. But then his birthday came and there was no brother and the day was all about him. He got to invite friends he had made all on his own in his first grade class for the first time, not kids he only knew through his mother's friends. It made him feel like a big boy, all grown up. And when Georgie did show up a week later, squalling and snuffling, Bill promised him quietly that their birthdays would never be in competition, and that he, Bill, would always make sure his baby brother had as good a party as he did.

So the start of the school year could be a bummer for sure, but after the first week or so of classes would come his birthday and then Georgie's and then it wasn't too long a wait until Halloween and costumes and candy. Then Thanksgiving. Then Christmas, oh yes. Sometimes Bill felt that his birthday was what started it all, and if it wasn't for him they couldn't have any holidays at all.

As the new school year started after the Summer of Terror (as Richie often called it, the cadence of his voice lending capital letters to the S and T), Bill began to feel the familiar prickle of excitement, wondering what his folks were going to do for his birthday. When Sharon took him back-to-school shopping and sent him to try on shoes on his own, was she secretly buying a present that she would hide in her closet and wrap in private, ready to surprise Bill? When Zack spent hours on end in the garage, supposedly fiddling with his tools or doing other manly things, was he really building Bill a gadget of some kind, something that would usher Bill into manhood? Something to do with learning to drive, which Bill would be doing in just over a year? Or maybe making Bill his own little workshop alongside Zack's, where they could work together on household

projects. Maybe it was a little childish to still get so hyped about his birthday and presents and a party, but Bill could use a little childish right now. He felt way older than fourteen.

The first day of school came and went, and no mention of Bill's upcoming birthday. He tried to drop a couple hints that he'd like to have a sleepover. He would invite the other Losers, minus Beverley. He wished she could come, too, but a girl sleeping over with six guys looked bad, even if he knew it was totally innocent. Still, it would be fun to stay up late and watch stupid movies and gorge on junk food with the guys. With each hint, Sharon would smile wanly, as if she didn't know what he was talking about. Zack cleared his throat and retreated behind the wall of his newspaper. They sure put up a good front, Bill decided, ignoring the queasiness in his stomach. Must be planning one helluva surprise.

The morning of his birthday dawned sunny and warm, with a nice autumn breeze to keep it from getting too hot. The nights were starting to get cold, and Bill was reluctant to get out from under his covers. Eventually the grumbling in his stomach was too powerful and he stumbled downstairs for breakfast.

Instead of his mother making pancakes and bacon and eggs - a traditional celebratory feast in their house - he found his father poking at a pan of runny scrambled eggs. Two plates were set out, toast already resting on each of them. The toast somehow managed to be undercooked on one side and charred to a crisp on the other.

"Where's M-m-m-mom?" Bill asked.

Zack barely glanced at him. "She's having a bit of a lie in," he said. "She's not feeling well this morning. Milk or OJ?"

Bill wanted to ask if he could have coffee. He was fourteen now, didn't that afford him a taste of being grown up? But the words died on his lips. It felt wrong to have to remind his parents what today was, so he said nothing. He simply pulled out the jug of orange juice and poured some as Zack tipped the eggs onto the plates. Bill grabbed forks from the silverware drawer and handed one to his dad.

They settled down to eat in silence. Bill's fingers fidgeted in his lap as

he choked down the runny eggs. Chasing them with mutilated toast only helped a little, but at least the juice was fresh. Things had a tendency to go bad in their fridge recently.

“You know,” Zack started, clearing his throat. Bill’s eyes jumped up expectantly, heart beating faster. Yes?

“You know, uh, this week is going to be hard for your mom,” Zack said, keeping his eyes averted. “Your brother...”

“Yeah, D-d-dad,” Bill said quietly, letting his eyes drop back to his plate. “Georgie w-w-would have been eh-eh-eight in a w-week.”

Zack’s lips thinned at the mention of Georgie’s name. “That’s right. So you be on your best behavior this week. Don’t you go upsetting her over anything, you hear?”

“Y-yes, sir,” Bill said. He glanced up, ready for one last shot. “D-dad?”

“Yes, Bill?”

“T-t-t-to-to-to-duh..duh..” Bill screwed his eyes up in frustration. “To...to...” The word would not come. “W-what’s t-t-t...”

Zack waited, but Bill trailed off into jaw-clenching silence, eyes averted. When it became clear he wasn’t going to finish, Zack stood up and took his plate to the sink. “I have to get to work,” he said. “Have a good day at school.” He paused on his way towards the kitchen door. “If you want a ride, get your stuff.”

Bill shook his head. “I’ll take S-s-silver.”

Zack left. Bill tipped the remains of his desperate meal into the trash and covered them up with a napkin so his dad wouldn’t be offended when he came home tonight. As Bill washed up the few breakfast dishes, he imagined Georgie popping out of the pantry, laughing. *We’re just joking, Bill*, the imaginary Georgie cried. *We know it’s your birthday!* His dad would come back in from the garage and his mother would come down the stairs. *Happy birthday to you*, they sang in his head.

School was uneventful. The other Losers acted like their normal selves, popping by his locker in the morning to say hi before drifting off to their homerooms. They took his silence in stride; Big Bill being quiet, especially in the morning, was nothing new. Only Eddie lingered for an extra minute, eyes trained like a hawk on Bill's face.

"Are you okay, man?"

Bill tried on a smile that even he knew looked fake. "Y-yeah. Just wor-worried about the m-math quiz. I d-d-didn't study."

The warning bell rang, but Eddie - punctual, careful Eddie - didn't move. Bill slammed his locker shut. "Are you sure?" Eddie asked.

"Yeah," Bill said again. "D-do I look s-s-sick or something?" Surely the thought of germs would get Eddie out of his face.

"No, not sick," Eddie said, following Bill even though his homeroom was at the other end of the 8th grade hall. "Sad."

Bill stopped just outside his classroom door. A million thoughts tumbled through his head. *My dead brother is ruining my birthday. My parents hate me because I'm still alive and their baby is dead. If you don't get away from me, I'll sneeze on you* . But before he could even try to stammer out an explanation, Mr. Tarrington gestured Bill to get into the classroom. "You're going to be late, Kaspbrak," Tarrington told Eddie. "Get where you need to go."

Eddie wavered, torn between obeying a teacher and getting an answer out of Bill. Bill made the decision for him by stepping into the classroom and waving goodbye. Eddie took off down the hall at a fast walk, one last "I'll see you later" flung over his shoulder.

"What was that about?" Stan whispered as Bill sat down next to him. Bill shrugged and pulled out last night's homework just as the final bell rang.

After math came P.E., then English, then lunch. In the cafeteria, Bill

sat with his friends as usual. If he was a bit quieter than normal, pushing his food around more than eating it, nobody said anything. Richie was plenty loud enough to make up for all of them should they all suddenly fall silent for no reason at all, Bill figured. Plus he wasn't much of a talker on most days.

Of course, on most days his best friend wasn't watching him like a hawk, either. Beverly, Richie, and Eddie sat on one side of the table, while Ben, Stanley, and Bill sat on the other. Ben always tried to make it so he sat directly across from Beverly, and the other Losers let him. They mostly didn't care who they sat next to or across from (although Richie and Eddie sat together more often than not). Today, Bill had arrived earlier than the others, staking out his place. Eddie practically slammed his tray down on the seat across from Bill and had kept one eye on him ever since.

Richie was up to his usual antics, trying to draw Eddie in, but Eddie was too preoccupied to give Richie much notice. So Richie turned his attention on Bev instead, exclaiming loudly about the "gawjus" blouse she was wearing today. Bill smiled in spite of himself. Nobody could be sad when Richie was around.

Bill glanced at Eddie again, expecting to find those blue eyes still riveted on his face, but Eddie had finally looked away - not at Richie but at Stan. He seemed to be saying something to Stan without words, head just barely shaking 'no.' Bill looked to his left at Stan. Stan was mouthing something at Eddie, but the instant Bill turned his head he stopped and dived into his homemade lunch.

Before Bill could demand what the fuck they were talking about behind his back - no, right in front of his face! - Richie slung his arm around Eddie's neck and pulled him into a hug that was more of a half-Nelson. "Isn't that right, Eds?"

"Beep-beep, Richie," Eddie said. Bill was sure he had no more idea of what Richie had been talking about than Bill himself did, but chances are it would have annoyed him no matter what.

Richie sighed. "You're no fun." He loosened his grip on Eddie's neck but did not let go entirely, choosing to shovel the school-slop into his face with one hand.

Bill continued to watch Eddie for the rest of the lunch period, but there weren't anymore secretive glances between him and Stan.

Bill came home to a silent house - no music, no happy laughter, no whiny arguments. Sharon smiled wanly when he greeted her. She was sitting at the kitchen table, ostensibly cooking. Yet the stove wasn't on, and the stuff Sharon had put into the frying pan stayed limply room temperature as she gazed into a mug of tea.

"How was your day, sweetheart?"

"It w-was g-g-g-good," Bill said, surprised. This was the first time all school year that she had asked. "Unev-v-ventful."

"That's nice, dear."

A year ago such a response would have caused Sharon to sigh and tell Bill he was turning into such a *teenager* - said with affection and wistfulness. She would ask him questions about his friends, classes, upcoming events. By the end of her grilling, he would find he had a lot more to talk about than he had originally thought, even on an uneventful day. Then she would ask Georgie to recount his day, and Georgie would comply without the evasiveness that came with being a *teenager*. Bill had found these interrogations tedious on most days, but now he would have given anything for her to ask after Eddie or math or Homecoming.

Sharon got up from the table and went to tend to the stir-fry on the stove. She poked at it with a spatula, uncomprehending why it wasn't cooking. Just as Bill was about to speak up, Sharon glanced at the dial and realized the problem. Bill wavered in the kitchen doorway for a moment longer, just in case... just to see...

"M-mom?"

Sharon looked over at him. "Yes?"

"I...I...uh." Bill took a deep breath. "Is your h-h-head f-feeling better?"

“What do you mean?”

“D-dad said you h-had a headache th-this morning,” Bill said.

“Oh.” The oil in the pan began to sizzle, heating up the vegetables.
“Yes, it’s better now. Thank you.”

Bill didn’t know what else to say, so he went to his bedroom to do his homework until Sharon called him down for dinner.

At half past ten, the house was quiet. Bill was already in bed. He had watched the evening programs with his parents, wilting bit by bit in the dazed silence. He went upstairs at nine, bidding them a good night. Neither of his parents noticed or commented on the early hour, simply wishing him a good night and sweet dreams. He stayed up for another hour reading comic books before deciding to just climb in bed and sleep the rest of this awful day away. He heard someone (probably his mom) go into the bathroom and brush their teeth, followed by the flush of the toilet. His dad was most likely asleep on the couch, having dozed off during the last program. He would waken sometime before midnight to stumble off to bed.

Bill closed his eyes tight but sleep would not come. He tried breathing deeply. He tried counting sheep. He tried imagining his body was made of stone. Nothing. His mind was a broken record of self-pity and empty fantasies.

At just after eleven, Bill heard his dad go to bed. Bill shifted onto his stomach. At 11:15, he flipped back over. He was too hot. No, too cold. He wanted his window open. No, closed. He -

Thwip.

His heart gave a terrible start. Unexpected noises still did that to him, even though it had been weeks since the horrors had stopped. *It’s just a branch against the window*, he told himself. *It’s just -*

Thwip.

It didn’t sound like a branch. It sounded like a small stone hitting his

window.

Thunk .

The next stone missed his window and hit the side of the house instead. Bill scrambled out of bed and pushed the curtains aside to peer out before the next stone woke up his parents.

In the yard stood all six of the other Losers, including Mike. They all had their bikes with them, and Eddie was holding Silver up as well. Fortunately Bill's window looked out over the backyard, otherwise a nosy night-owl neighbor might have spotted them.

Bill slid his window open. "W-what are you d-doing?" he hissed at them.

"Come on," Eddie whispered, his voice just loud enough to travel to Bill's ear if he strained hard. "You gotta come with us."

"Where?"

"You'll see," Bev replied. Her voice carried much easier and Bill glanced at his bedroom door, as if he would be able to see through it to know if his parents had woken up.

The others waved encouragingly at him except Richie, who waved spastically. He puffed his cheeks out and pointed to them, miming something at Bill that left Bill completely befuddled. Resigned, he motioned them to wait as he slid jeans on over his pyjama bottoms and grabbed his jean jacket. A windbreaker would have been preferable but the fabric made too much noise to be a good idea. He closed his window and slid silently downstairs. At the kitchen door, he used a tea towel to muffle the click of the deadbolt, then joined his friends.

"What's wr-wrong with R-R-Richie?" Bill whispered as he took Silver from Eddie's grasp.

"He wanted to let you know he's not allowed to talk on account of his lack of volume control," Stan replied so quietly that Bill felt the essence of his words more than actually heard him. "Let's go."

They pushed their bikes out to the street, then mounted and rode in silence. Eddie led the way. Bill had no idea where they were going, but their options for this time of night were starkly limited. Within a couple minutes, he figured they must be heading for the clubhouse. His suspicion was confirmed when they made their way to the outskirts of town.

They parked their bikes and went the rest of the way on foot. It was so dark they kept stumbling. Stan had one weak flashlight to guide the way, but that was it. When they entered the clubhouse, he turned it off.

“What -” Bill began. Although they could be as loud as they wanted now, his voice was still hushed.

There was a rustle of fabric, then the metallic scrape of a zipper. “What time is it, Mikey?” Bev asked. A ghostly light shone for a brief moment as Mike lit up his watch to read the numbers. “11:56. We just made it in time.”

More rustling. A plastic tupperware opening. “Did it get smashed?” Eddie whispered to whomever was holding the tupperware.

“I can’t tell.” Ben’s voice. “I think I - ack, I got it on me. I need light.”

“Richie.”

Snick - fwish . Richie struck a lighter and the flame burned into Bill’s vision. Just beyond the circle of light he could see Ben holding not a tupperware but a baking pan with a lid, approximately six inches wide and nine inches long. Inside was a sheet of cut-up brownies, topped with icing that had gotten smashed and smeared during their journey. As Bill watched, Mike pulled a birthday candle out of his pocket and set it in one of the brownies. When he backed off, Richie brought the flame to the wick and let it catch fire.

Bev started them off quietly, the others quickly joining in. “Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Bill. Happy birthday to you.”

“Make a wish, big Bill,” Richie said with a grin.

"B-b-but... why?" Bill managed to splutter.

"Cuz that's what you do, dumbass," Richie said. His voice shifted to that of an old geezer - which mostly sounded like Richie with a head cold. "And if you don't tell anyone, then your birthday wish will come true, sonny boy!"

"I d-do-do-don't un-und-d-der -"

"It was Eddie's idea," Stan said. "He said today was your birthday but you hadn't mentioned a party or anything."

"I couldn't remember the last time you hadn't invited me to your birthday party," Eddie added, voice wounded. In the dying light of the candle, Bill could see his eyebrows drawn together in concern. "And you were much quieter than usual today."

"Eddie said Georgie's birthday comes right after yours," Mike said.

"We thought maybe it was possible you didn't want to celebrate because of that," Stan continued. "But Eddie said that didn't sound like you."

"I made the brownies," Ben said. "My mom doesn't care if I bake sweets, and we always have boxes of cake or brownie mix lying around. And we don't have to eat them all tonight, as long as we return the pan before she notices it's missing. That'll be a couple of days at least."

Bill swallowed hard, trying to find the right words. A strained silence bubbled up, the other kids glancing at each other as the last of the candle's light went dark.

"Did we overstep?" Bev asked the darkness.

"N-no!" Bill cried. "No th-this... you g-guys. This is am-m-mazing. I c-can't believe you did this for m-m-me." He reached out to the last place he had seen Eddie's shoulder disappear and pulled his best friend into a bear hug.

"You deserve it, Big Bill," Eddie whispered into his shoulder.

Bill let him go just as Stan snapped his flashlight back on. "We don't have any plates or anything," Stan said apologetically. "You'll have to use your hands. Everyone grab a piece. Richie, I think the one with wax all over it is for you."

"Aw, thanks Stanny."

"Oh no!" Bev cried. "Bill, you didn't blow out the candle. It just went out. You won't get your wish."

Bill smiled at her. "I already did."

There was a pause, then Richie - his voice choked with barely restrained laughter - said, "That is abso-fucking- *lutely* the sappiest fucking thing you have ever said, and I am *never* going to let you live it down."

The others burst into laughter and dove into the pan of brownies.

2. Stan's Home Alone Adventure

Summary for the Chapter:

Thanks to Killersnotmonster for the beta!

Notes for the Chapter:

Reddie is strongly hinted at this chapter. It will definitely ramp up in the next few chapters. Maybe some vague hints of poly!Losers if you squint.

2nd time: Stan

Stan's heart thudded with both excitement and trepidation as his parents' car backed out of the driveway and into the street. They were going on a weekend trip to Bangor, and Stan had asked if he could stay home. Alone. *And they said yes !*

There had been a lot of fretting and warnings. Don't open the door to any strangers, don't let anyone know his folks were out of town - no, not even his friends. No parties. Keep the house orderly, pre-made food is in the fridge (do not turn on the stove, no matter what), and call the hotel if you need anything or feel afraid. Be back home by 7 PM as if there was a curfew. If there's an emergency, call 9-1-1. If you need help but it's not an emergency, here's a list of trusted adults in the neighborhood.

They promised they would be back before 5 on Sunday evening. From 10 AM Saturday until then, Stan was on his own. 31 hours of freedom. It was a test, to see if he was mature enough to do more and more things on his own. At 14, Stan didn't know anyone else with this level of responsibility, nor did he know anyone who would be up to the test. Maybe Bill or Mike. Definitely not Richie. Maybe Eddie, but his mother would never dream of leaving him unattended until he was at least 25.

Stan was *not* going to fuck this up.

He brought his boombox downstairs to listen to it while he dusted the

living room. He turned it up a little louder than he would have if his parents were home but not so loud it would cause the neighbors to complain. Dusting was required every Saturday before he was allowed to go hang out with his friends. Stan quite liked it; it was relaxing, meditative. He could spend the time in his own head, just thinking. He didn't get a lot of time to do that most days. The addition of the music to this routine only made it better. It wasn't that his mom was opposed to music as they cleaned, she just preferred classical or jazz or outdated tunes from the '50s. Stan was fine with those kinds of music, but he found that contemporary stuff had a quicker beat and helped him move faster.

Stan finished the dusting in record time with no less quality to his work, then made himself a quick lunch. He didn't bother loading up on too much food, since there were always snacks at the clubhouse if he should get hungry.

He ran through a mental checklist, feeling like he was forgetting something. Chores were done, he was more or less full, and he hadn't left anything on that could burn down the house. He was ready to go meet his friends at the clubhouse. He went to retrieve his bike, triple checked that all of the locks were secure, and headed off towards the Barrens.

"I'm just *saying* ," Richie continued, "Hulk has the muscles, sure, but Thor could just blast him with lightning. Are you going to tell me that Hulk wouldn't notice getting *electrocuted* ?"

"And I'm just *saying* ," Stan countered, trying to match the tone in Richie's voice, "that aren't you getting a little old to be arguing about comic books?"

It was a relaxing day in the clubhouse. Spring was in full bloom, the last of the snow now several weeks in the past. It was still a little chilly down here, but seven teenage bodies produced enough heat to keep them comfortable.

"Listen, gramps," Richie said, poking his comic book in Stan's direction. "You're never too old for comic book discussions. I bet Mrs.

Hunter would be *ecstatic* at my use of logical reason to analyze and deduce who would win in a fight between Hulk and Thor.”

“Would she, though?” Eddie dug his toes into Richie’s side. They were sharing the hammock yet again, sitting at different ends so it wouldn’t be too weird. Stan figured they were well beyond weird at this point. They shared the damn thing more often than not.

Richie gave Eddie a deadpan look. “I’m not ticklish.”

“I’m not trying to tickle you,” Eddie retorted, feet still hard at work. They moved up Richie’s side to burrow into his armpit.

“Ew,” Stan commented from where he was playing chess with Ben. “Your feet are going to smell like Richie’s pits now.”

“His feet are already pretty rank,” Richie said, dramatically pinching his nose shut.

“Yum yum,” Eddie said, waving his feet in front of Richie’s nose. “You wanna lick ‘em.”

“Eww, Eddie, that’s gross!” Bev cried from where she sat with Mike and Bill. The three of them were looking through some magazines and comic books, and it was they who had gotten Richie onto the topic of Hulk versus Thor in the first place.

“Check,” Ben said quietly to Stan.

Stan turned his attention back to the board, and sure enough, while Stan had been paying more attention to the hammock antics, Ben had backed him into a nice little corner. Stan mentally cursed and brought his full awareness back to the game, drowning out the others’ voices.

In the end, it was all for naught. Although Stan managed to get himself out of the current predicament, Ben already had the upper hand and would not give it up. Five moves later, Stan was boxed in again, and this time there was no way out.

“Checkmate,” Ben declared, then immediately glanced over to see if Beverly had noticed. Stan stood up and stretched, then leaned down

to shake Ben's hand for a good game, just like his father had always taught him. There were no sore losers in the Uris household. Stan would just have to focus better next time, no matter what Eddie decided to shove in Richie's face.

"Do you think it's warm enough to go for a swim yet?" Mike asked, peering out of the clubhouse.

"I d-d-doubt it," Bill said, "but m-maybe we can f-f-find something else t-to do o-o-outside."

They all agreed eagerly. They'd been cooped up for the vast majority of the last four months and they were all ready to stretch their legs a bit. Stan and Ben cleaned up their game while the others stowed away their various snacks and reading material. The last thing Stan did before they all left was carefully take off his hairnet and leave it in the coffee can. He was the only one who still wore one, the others long since deciding to take their chances against the spiders. So far no one's hair had been assaulted by any arachnids, but Stan liked the way it kept his hair clean and neat while they were surrounded by so much dirt. Richie occasionally teased him about it, good natured, and Stan usually had a smart comeback ready for him. And if Richie ever tried to push his buttons for real, Stan had a secret weapon the others didn't know about.

I know your secret...I know why you always share the hammock with Eddie .

It was just a hunch, but Stan had known Richie since kindergarten. And they had known Eddie for a few years now. Richie and Eddie had always been something of an odd couple (everyone said the same about Stan and Richie; somehow Rich just attracted a certain type of friend), yet lately something had become more...intense in their friendship. Like they were dancing around something they didn't want to confront. The biggest change came from Richie's side of the relationship. Yes, he was still loud and obnoxious and constantly trying to get and hold Eddie's attention. But then sometimes, when he thought no one was looking - and usually no one was, except for Stan - he would become quiet and introspective, eyes trained on Eddie's every movement. In those times, he seemed...sad. Pained.

So Stan stayed quiet, even when he was an inch away from decking Richie. He didn't want to be the one to expose Richie's pain.

Not far from the clubhouse, they found a half-downed tree that must have been blown over in a storm. The only thing that kept it from tumbling fully to the earth was that the other trees were packed in so closely, so that it was caught at a thirty-degree angle.

"I'm going to climb it," Richie announced immediately.

"You'll break your neck," Eddie cried, eyes comically wide.

"You'll be there to catch me if I fall," Richie countered, batting his eyelashes. "And if all else fails, I'll just aim for Haystack and use him as a trampoline."

"Beep beep," Ben said, making a face while the others smothered giggles. "Actually, I was thinking I might..." He trailed off, ducking under the fallen trunk to examine it from the other side. His hand travelled around the wide girth. Stan walked over and pressed both palms into the dead bark. The tree was so big; it must have been very old.

"We could use it to make a structure of some kind," Ben said. "Like a lean-to." He didn't sound terribly enthusiastic about the idea, like it was boring.

"We a-already have the cl-clubhouse," Bill said.

"Yeah," Ben agreed. "Actually," he continued, looking a little shy, "you know what I'd really like to do? I wish I had the tools to carve a boat big enough for all of us. Wouldn't that be cool?"

Richie jumped up on the trunk, starting closer to the roots before scrambling up the length to where Stan and Ben stood down below him. "Westward ho, Cap'n!" he cried in what approximated as a rough old seadog's voice. "We're off to find th' Nor'west Passage, I say. Arrr."

Stan rolled his eyes. "I don't think pirates were trying to find the Northwest Passage."

Richie scrunched his face up. “Arrr. We’re here to plunder the booty of them scurvy bastards what arrrrre trying to find th’ Nor’west Passage. Shiver me timbers, wot wot.”

Everyone cracked up as the Pirate Voice mashed ridiculously with the English Gentleman Voice.

“Wot say ye, shipmate Kaspbrak?” There was now a dash of the Irish Cop Voice thrown in and it was becoming a tangled mess. “Are ye prepared to have yer booty plundered, arrr?”

“What?! No!” Eddie leaped up to smack at Richie’s feet, but Richie simply danced out of the way, arms splayed for balance. “Go plunder someone else’s booty.”

“If ye wish to protect yer honour, dear lad, ye’ll have to come up here and fight me for it. First t’fall off is a maggoty pile of festerin’ haggis,” Richie taunted.

“And break my arm again?” Eddie demanded. “Fuck no.”

“H-here,” Bill said, throwing a long, thick stick up to Richie, who just barely caught it. “Your sword, Captain.”

“Ack, ye be confused, me good sir,” Richie said. “*I’m* not the captain of the pirate ship. I’m but the lowly first mate. Who will be mine cap-i-tan?”

“Me,” Bev cried. “We shall be the Dread Ship Juggernaut and we *will* plunder all booties we see.”

“Stanley, me boy,” Richie said, pointing his sword at Stan. “Will ye join our scurvy crew?”

There was something enticing about being a pirate for a day. “Sure. Does that make me second mate?”

The others decided they were on the HMS Minnow, a small but fearless ship bound for the West Indies. Bill was captain, making Eddie his first mate. At first Ben sided with the good guys, but it seemed unfair that they had an extra shipmate, so soon he abandoned his post to become a saloon owner who was caught between the

stinky but amusing pirates versus the lawful but rigid naval officers. Mostly the whole thing involved chasing each other with sticks that looked like they could be swords, except Ben, who, as a savvy barkeep, was allowed to carry a short “gun” instead.

It was all completely silly and ridiculous. They dashed around trees, jumped on logs, pushed each other into mud puddles. Ben shot each of them at least once, but never to “kill” so that they could keep playing. Just as things seemed like they couldn’t get any more exciting, Eddie suddenly whirled on Bill, jabbed him in the arm with his sword, and declared, “I’m a pirate now! Take that, Captain.”

Richie whooped loudly. “Tha’s right, matey! Barkeep! A bottle o’ yer finest grog for our new scallywag.”

“No fair,” Mike yelled.

Stan jogged over to him. “I’ll join the navy in exchange for a full pardon for all of my crimes I committed in the name of piracy.”

Bill and Mike took a moment to confer, then Bill nodded solemnly at Stan. “If you fully r-repent your ways a-as a p-p-pirate, we will accept y-you.”

“I repent.”

Bill tapped Stan’s shoulders with his sword as if he were knighting Stan. “Welcome to the navy.” They grinned at each other.

“Good. That means I finally get to do something I’ve always dreamed of: stab Richie.”

“Hey!”

Stan took a running lunge at Richie, narrowly missing. The chasing began all over again. They ran until they were dead exhausted, collapsing in a heap together on the ground. Stan knew he’d have one hell of a time getting the twigs and leaves out of his curly hair later (and that Richie would have the same problem), and wished vaguely he still had his hairnet. But he was too content to get up out of the dirt. Just because he was mature enough to stay home alone overnight didn’t mean he couldn’t still have fun with his friends.

Even if make-believe pirate games were a little childish.

"I'm hungry," Bev said. "Are there any cookies left in the clubhouse?"

"I think so," Eddie said. "But it's almost dinnertime. You'll ruin your appetite if you fill up on cookies now."

Richie closed his eyes as if Eddie's words physically hurt him. "You *literally* are a 40-year-old woman, aren't you, Eds? You're my mother in the form of a teeny tiny baby."

"How can I *be* your mother *and* fuck her every night?"

Stan wriggled out of the pile of bodies, causing Richie's head to thump against the ground. "Oww," Richie whined.

"I gotta get going," Stan said, brushing his clothes off.

"Why? It's not like there's a curfew right now," Bev said.

Stan wanted to tell them the truth so badly. Partly because it was bragging rights, partly because he didn't like lying to his friends. But he had promised. "My mom's making a special dinner tonight and I told her I'd be home by six."

Richie squinted at him. It looked rather comical from Stan's perspective, standing tall above Richie. "Fine," Richie huffed. "Tell your mom I said hi." He made a kissy face at Stan.

"Bye, Stan." Bill waved lazily from his spot, head propped up on Richie's thigh and legs tangled with Bev's. The others offered a chorus of exhausted farewells as Stan made his way out of the Barrens.

Stan made it home just before the deadline. He was just heating up his dinner in the microwave when the phone rang, startling him out of his thoughts. It was his mother, calling to make sure he was home and safe. She told him a little about the event she and his father were attending, but it sounded like boring grown-up stuff that Stan wasn't quite ready to care about yet. Nevertheless, he made the appropriate

interested noises and answered her questions about how he was holding up in the house by himself.

Stan turned on the television as he ate, a luxury never afforded in their household. Of course, it being Saturday, there was nothing good on. So after he finished his meal and washed up his dishes, Stan turned it back off again. Silence swamped the house.

He turned on his boombox again and grabbed the book he was currently reading. It was a good distraction for a while. It was an interesting read - a long-held but little-known theory that today's modern birds had evolved from dinosaurs. It sure gave bird-watching a whole new dynamic, studying their movements and wondering if that was how dinosaurs had moved millions of years ago.

Normally Stan could get so immersed in what he was reading that the rest of the world fell away. Not so tonight. First the music was too loud, so he turned it down. Then the radio commercials were ruining his concentration, so he turned it off completely. Then it was too quiet. Did the refrigerator always make that much noise? Maybe he should go check on it... Nope, it was closed up tight and fine. Might as well grab a soda while he was there. The pop and fizz as he opened up the soda was distressingly loud in the silence of the house. He instinctively felt a wave of guilt over drinking a soda so late at night before he remembered his parents wouldn't know what time of day he was drinking it.

Stan glanced at the microwave clock. It was only a quarter past eight. He'd never realised how boring being on his own would be. Well, no, boring wasn't quite the right word. Stan never had trouble entertaining himself, even when his parents weren't home. But the difference was they were never out this late at night. It felt different. The darkness outside seemed to enhance the silence of the house, causing Stan's heart to beat just a little bit faster.

When a loud creak sounded from the unoccupied second floor, Stan nearly jumped out of his skin. "It's just the house settling," he said out loud, trying to dispel the anxiety growing in his chest.

It didn't work. His hand shook as he turned the radio back on. He tried to lose himself in the sound of the DJ's voice, then realised he

wouldn't be able to hear if someone tried to break in. He turned the radio back off again.

Never once did it occur to him to call his parents' hotel. He would *not* fail this test. He had faced Pennywise and defeated it. Staying home alone one night would not kill him.

Of course, he'd had his friends to rely on down in the sewers. Here, he had no one.

Stan went over to his father's desk and pulled the top page off the steno pad. A list. A list would calm his mind. It always did. At the top of the page, Stan wrote "STOP IRRATIONAL FEARS" in huge block letters. Below that, he began to list:

1. Pennywise is not around anymore. Won't come to kill me (I think)
2. Nobody has ever been robbed on our street (that I ever heard of)
3. All the doors and windows are locked
4. If I scream really loudly the neighbors will hear and call the cops
5. Keep the phone within arm's reach at all times.

Stan breathed a sigh of relief, glancing at the living room phone. It was on a little table just behind the couch, easily within reach if he sat on the couch until bedtime. He'd been right - the list made him feel better. It felt good to organize the little things that had been building up in his head and prove to himself he was being completely ridic-

BRING-BRIIIING. BRING-BRIIIIIING.

"*Shit*," Stan yelled, hand flying to his heart, which was ricocheting all over his chest. The phone sounded unnaturally loud, and for a moment Stan forgot that he was supposed to answer it. Then his mind kicked back into gear and he practically leaped over the couch to pick it up before the answering machine could kick in. It was probably just his parents again, checking in on him...

"Hello?" he said, hoping his voice didn't sound as shaky as his hands

were.

“Stan the man!”

Stan exhaled. “Richie.”

“What’s up, dude?”

“Um, nothing? You okay, man?”

“Sure, sure. Just, you know, wondering why my best friend lied to me today.”

Stan perched on the arm of the couch. “What are you talking about? I didn’t lie about anything.”

“So you’re saying that if I came over right now, I’d find the delightful Mr. and Mrs. Uris at home having just had some amazing dinner that you just *had* to rush home for?”

“Yes, of course.” Stan’s heart pounded.

“See, now, Stanley, you’re lying to me again.” Richie tsked loudly into the phone.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because it’s Saturday,” Richie said as if that explained everything. Which, it really didn’t. Stan said nothing, waiting for Richie to start making sense. (Often it was a long wait.)

Richie sighed. “I don’t know a whole lot about Jews, but I do know that from Friday night until Saturday night that’s supposed to be your day of rest. Like how for Christians, it’s Sunday. And yeah your folks aren’t the most observant Jews ever, but your mom never cooks a big important meal on Saturdays. Unless it’s one of the holidays you get high on.”

“Rich, for the last time, they’re called the High Holidays because -”

Richie went on, steamrolling over Stan’s protests. “I’ve been to your house tons of times on Saturdays and your mom always says how she

never does anything major because it's the one day out of the week she gets to relax. Yeah, she makes you do your little chores, and she does little things for upkeep, but never anything super big like making a special meal that you just *have* to rush home for."

"Maybe today is a High Holiday?" Stan tried.

"Nuh uh. Otherwise you'd've been in Jew church all day."

"Okay, fine," Stan relented. "I lied. Why do you care?"

"Because." Maybe Stan's ears were still playing tricks on him, but he would have sworn Richie sounded *hurt*. "You're Stan the man. You never lie to me. You roll your eyes and snap at me and sometimes even throw things at me. But you never lie. Why'd you lie, man?"

"I...I had to. I'm not supposed to tell anyone why I had to be home early tonight."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just..." It was so tempting to just *tell* him. Richie was a loudmouth, true. But he could be trusted with a secret if it was important enough. Stan knew that. They all knew that. "You won't tell anyone?"

"Depends," Richie said immediately. At least he was honest. "Is it something the other Losers should know?"

"No, no. It's really no big deal. It's just, my parents are out of town this weekend and I'm by myself. My parents didn't want anyone knowing in case someone decided to mess with me or convince me to throw a party or something."

Richie gasped loudly. "Of all the slanderous atrocities! Does your dad really think that li'l innocent *moi* would convince you to throw a party if I knew you were home all by your little lonesome?"

Stan huffed a laugh that was as much relief as it was amusement. "Yes. Yes, Richie. That's exactly what he and my mom think because it's the absolute truth."

"It is not," Richie protested. He paused. "Okay, so it is definitely the truth. But. It would only be a small party. I'd just invite the Losers. And a whole horde of chicks. But it's not like they'd actually show up for the likes of us."

"The likes of us, no," Stan agreed. "But I think my parents have seen too many dumb teen movies. The horde of chicks would show up with a keg and most of the football team. The house would be trashed in an hour. And poor little me would be completely unable to stop them. I'd end up in tears, locked in the master bathroom, wondering where my life went wrong."

Richie cackled. "True, true. Although that sounds more like Eddie's fate than yours. So, tell me. What's it like being all by yourself?"

"Lonely," Stan admitted. "And a little creepy. I keep imagining every little bump is a serial killer come to chop me into tiny little bits."

"I'd say you're the one who's watched too many movies, but given our last summer I can't really blame ya," Richie said quietly. "Want me to come over? Keep you company?"

"No, Richie," Stan said urgently. "My parents were really specific. No one is supposed to know I'm alone. They're testing me to see if I'm really mature enough for more responsibility."

"Yeah, but you sounded pretty freaked when you answered the phone," Richie said. "And you just said you're creeped out. I promise I won't throw a party, I just wanna make sure you're okay."

"I'm fine, okay?" Stan snapped. "I shouldn't have said I was creeped out. I know Pennywise isn't going to jump out at me from my closet just because my parents are out of town. That's not how this shit works. And... and I don't want to have to tell my parents I failed." The last came out as a whisper.

"So don't tell them," Richie reasoned. "Look, it's fine to be freaked. I know I would be if I was all by myself. Doesn't matter what I told my parents, I'd ask all of you guys to come keep me company. All night long. And I don't mean like in a party way, just like... Man, can you imagine me on my own for an entire night? I'd either have to stop

talking or start talking to myself. Either one ends with me going crazy.”

“I’m not you,” Stan pointed out. “I don’t get bothered by silence.”

“Search your feelings, Stanley,” Richie said in a somewhat-unmistakable impression of Darth Vader. “Forget your parents for a minute. What do *you* want? What would make *you* comfortable?”

Stan considered the question for a minute, though he really didn’t need to. “I wish you guys could be here to keep me company. I - I thought I was ready to be on my own, but I’m... Well, I’m not exactly scared, but I’m...”

“Freaked?”

“Unnerved.”

“You’re like a walking thesaurus, Stan.”

“Shut up.”

“Love you, too, Stan-o.”

They were quiet for a moment. After so much silence that evening, Stan thought he would hate it, especially since quiet was not Richie’s natural state. But just hearing Richie breathing on the other end of the line was enough to convince him he wasn’t really alone. Stan finally relaxed for the first time since coming home.

“I’m sorry for lying to you,” Stan said.

“You better be,” Richie said sternly. Which Stan knew was Richie-speak for ‘you’re forgiven.’ “Never let it happen again.”

“I should probably go. It’s getting late...” He really didn’t want to hang up.

“Stanley, it’s not even nine yet. Okay, it’s almost nine. But not yet. What time are your parents coming home tomorrow?”

Stan no longer reeled at the quick-paced change of topic. “Around

five, they said.”

“In the evening?”

“Yeah.”

Richie sighed. “Seriously, Stan?”

“Yeah? Why?”

“Hold on to your tighty-whities, dude. I’ll be right there.”

“Wha- ? Richie, no, you -”

Before Stan could say anything further, the line went dead.

“Fuck.”

It turned out Richie’s definition of “right there” was a little flexible. It was almost an hour later before the doorbell rang and Stan leaped to his feet. In the meantime, at least Stan hadn’t been fretting about how quiet the house was. He had been too preoccupied with silently grousing at Richie in his head.

“Did you tell your parents where you are and why?” Stan demanded by way of greeting as he jerked the door open. His voice died, preventing any further chastisements from coming forth. Not only was Richie standing on his front step, but so were Bill, Mike, and Ben. Stan stared at them.

“Please tell me none of you told your parents that mine are out of town,” Stan croaked.

“N-no way,” Bill assured him.

“My mom was just happy I got invited to a sleepover,” Ben said. “Even if I did ‘forget’ to tell her until last minute.”

“My parents took some convincing,” Mike said. “But I didn’t say anything about your folks being gone.”

“Bev and Eds are gonna have to join us later,” Richie said, pushing past Stan. “My ‘rents didn’t care about me coming over here. I think their exact words were -” he affected a high pitched voice - ““Oh, that Stanley would *never* do anything naughty. He’s *such* a good influence on our little rascal. Yes, Richard, *yes please* go sleep over at his house. Maybe his good manners will rub off on you.’ So,” back to his real voice now, “you have my parents’ permission to rub off on me, Stan.”

Bill made a face at the horrible innuendo, while Ben looked completely bemused. Mike just sighed. Stan rolled his eyes. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he mumbled.

Richie blew him a kiss.

They each had a backpack with them, and Ben’s was bulging more than would be normal for a change of clothes, pyjamas, and toiletries. “What’s in there?” Stan asked as he closed the door behind them. He hoped no nosy neighbours would ask his parents about the sleepover.

Ben flushed and grinned shyly. “I brought snacks.”

Richie pounced on his backpack before it was fully off Ben’s shoulders. “Haystack’s got the goods! Way to go, Ben. We would have starved otherwise.” He pretended to faint onto the Urises’ neat couch, disarranging the cushions.

“Guys! You can’t come in here like it’s a party and just make a mess. I’m serious, my parents *cannot* know you were here,” Stan said.

“W-we’ll cl-clean up before w-we leave tom-m-morrow,” Bill promised. “Won’t we, R-Richie?”

“Of course. What kind of heathens do you take us for?”

Stan let out a huge sigh of relief. Having his friends around making noise was infinitely better than the silence of the house all by himself. Even if they did make a mess. Ben began unpacking snacks while Richie shuffled through Stan’s VHS collection.

“We didn’t bring any sleeping bags or anything,” Mike said. “Do you

have any bedding we can use?"

The Urises weren't big campers, but they did have a couple of sleeping bags. Stan enlisted Mike and Bill's help in gathering them and all the spare comforters and blankets from the linen closet, as well as the bedding from Stan's bed and every pillow they could find. By the time they were finished, they had a rather cozy-looking nest in the living room and Richie had chosen a movie for them.

Bev showed up halfway through the movie, tapping lightly on the back door. Eddie came an hour later, looking rather annoyed. "My mom took forever to go to bed," he groused. "I made the stupid mistake of asking to go to a sleepover at Stan's. First of all, it was too last minute." He counted on his fingers. "Second of all, I'd be late to church tomorrow, she said. And then she went on about how your folks are ungodly people who don't believe in Jesus so they'd probably try to corrupt me while I'm here. Third, going out so late would surely kill me. So she kept checking on me to make sure I hadn't snuck out."

"Aw, our Eds would never dream of disobeying his dearest mommy," Richie snickered.

"Obviously," Eddie said drily. "That's why I'm not here right now." He plopped down next to Richie and grabbed a handful of pretzels. "I left a pretty convincing dummy in my bed in case she checks on me in the middle of the night. And don't -" he pointed a finger at Richie, who had just opened his mouth - "say anything about me being the real dummy."

"You ruin all my fun." Richie pouted until Eddie shoved a pretzel into his mouth.

"Thanks for coming," Stan said quietly. "All of you. I know it's stupid to be scared to be alone..."

Bev reached over and hugged him tight. "It's not stupid. I know if my parents left me alone all night long, I'd be imagining all sorts of terrible things." She shivered against Stan, and to his embarrassment he realised he could feel her breasts pressing against him. He willed his body not to do anything stupid.

“Me too,” Ben added. For a wild moment Stan thought he meant Stan’s physical predicament before he remembered what Bev had just said. Beverly released Stan at last while the others muttered their various agreements.

“A-a-any t-time you need us, just c-call,” Bill told him. Stan nodded.

“Thanks.”

Bev placed her hand in a vaguely central area. “Losers forever,” she said.

They all placed their hands on top of hers. “Losers forever,” they repeated, holding on for a long moment before finally breaking apart.

There was a pause that threatened to become awkward until Richie jumped up and ejected the VHS from the tape player. “Who wants a scary movie next?”

Stan groaned and threw his pillow at him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Maine has no laws on what age you can leave your kids home alone overnight (or at all). The general consensus online is don't leave your kids home alone overnight at any age, but I figure things were different in the early '90s, especially in a small town (I was 3 at the time so I'm just guessing). To the parents who said they wouldn't leave their kids home alone until the kids were 21 or 25: what the actual fuck?? Those are ADULTS.

3. Mike's Window

Summary for the Chapter:

The Losers find a hidden secret in Mike's barn

Notes for the Chapter:

TW: Antisemitism and swastikas

Life on the Hanlon farm was as mysterious and exotic to the Losers as life in Mexico or Australia. They lived in a semi-rural area, sure, and some students bused or drove into Derry for school, so it's not like the Losers didn't know some farm kids. But it was impossible for them to fathom what life was like on a farm until they met Mike.

They had never contemplated waking up before the sun rose on a crisp autumn day, for example, or having a property so large that it was better to drive a rundown old truck around it than to walk. They couldn't imagine lying down in a pasture with a cow for a pillow, or hiding in a pile of freshly shorn wool (it was the itchiest mistake he'd ever made, Mike said). Sometimes his reasons for not making it to the clubhouse on a given day bordered on the fantastic or outrageous to their limited imaginations, like the time Mike said he'd been caught up shoeing a horse ("Was it somewhere it wasn't supposed to be?" Eddie asked, causing a lot of confusion until Bill realised that Eddie had heard "shoo" instead of "shoe"). Pitching hay, gathering eggs, castrating sheep and bulls (the boys all reflexively crossing their legs as Mike explained the process), hoeing (beep beep, Richie), ploughing (BEEP BEEP RICHIE), milking cows, delivering baby animals: the things Mike did in his day-to-day life caused no end of fascination, mirth, bafflement, and sometimes consternation in the others.

Sometimes, one or two or all of the Losers would offer to help around the farm. This was usually in summer, when they were tired of doing nothing in the clubhouse or swimming in the quarry, and Mike was busy from pre-dawn to midafternoon every day. The only reason he didn't work dawn to dusk like his father was that Will firmly believed in letting Mike have a childhood. Will had been forced to grow up

well before his childhood was over, and he didn't want that to happen to Mike. Nevertheless, as the years went by and Mike became more and more of a man, his father expected more work and longer hours out of him.

So occasionally, if they hadn't seen Mike for a few days, the Losers would venture out to the Hanlon farm to see what was up. There was so much to do during summer that Will was glad to enlist their services for a dollar an hour - a paltry sum, but the work was a lot more fun than mowing lawns to earn money, and they could eat a portion of what they picked. Richie came more often than anyone, partly so that he could mooch money, partly because his boundless energy and hyperfocus was finally useful for something, even if he did crack a lot of jokes about how farming words sounded dirty. Will quipped often about adopting Richie and using him to pull the plow instead of the old mare Darlene.

Today it was the height of summer, so there was an endless amount of crop picking to do. From late spring until the end of October or so, Mike would be out in the fields for several hours, picking whatever was ripe. Right now, at the end of July, that was apricots, peaches, melons, green beans, tomatoes, and every kind of berry imaginable. Mike's favorite were the blackberries, fingers deftly searching out the plumpest, softest ones that fell right into his hand the moment he brushed them.

When the Losers were good and exhausted (and full), and Mike had completed a satisfactory amount of work for his father, they would find a nice, shady spot and cool down. There were plenty of places to choose from. The apple orchard was a nice choice right now, since the apples were far from ripe but their trees were thoroughly leafed out. The storage barn was also a good spot. Sometimes the hired hands would spend their lunch there and leave behind cigarette butts with enough of a tail for Richie and Bev to salvage the tobacco and roll their own. They could stretch out among the farm equipment and sacks of feed, talking lazily or drifting off for a light nap.

There wasn't as much horsing around on these days. They were tired from working hard, and they were starting to feel too old to run around like kids. Their silly pirate adventure had only happened a few months ago, but the end of the school year had brought with it a

new sense of emerging adulthood. Some of them would be turning fifteen soon - old enough to get a learner's permit. Being a licensed driver - and the freedom that came with it - was so close they could practically taste the gasoline fumes and rusted metal that would be each of their first cars. The ones that would be lucky enough to get one, that is.

"A 1960 Chevrolet Corvette," Richie said dreamily on one hot July afternoon. They'd spent nearly five hours out in the fields, and now they were in the storage barn lazily discussing their dream cars. "Now that's the shit. A convertible, of course. Drives the chicks wild."

"How would you know?" Eddie retorted.

"Cause your mom -"

"Goddamn it, Richie, that joke's older than your skidmarks."

"What about you, Ben?" Bev interjected before Eddie could say anything further about the contents of Richie's underwear or Richie could think up a good comeback. "What's your dream car?"

"A Ferrari F40," Ben said without elaborating.

"Oooh, we've got a little speed demon on our hands," Richie teased. "That baby can go over 200 miles an hour."

Bill whistled appreciatively. "I d-don't care what k-kind of car I get, as long as it r-runs."

Eddie nodded in agreement. "I really want to buy an old sporty car, actually. I could fix it up, rebuild the engine. There's one on Howie Laughton's lot that I could save up for. It's a Continental and it's real run down so it's dirt cheap. It would be pretty safe too, once I get it running. But my mom won't let me."

"Why not?" Mike asked. Eddie was by far the most mechanically minded of them. Sometimes Eddie would help Will with broken down farm equipment. If any of them could rebuild an engine, it was him.

Eddie sighed. "Because it's my mom," he grouched. "She doesn't think I can rebuild an engine. She thinks I'll die if I so much as *look* at an

engine. And even if I did manage it, she'd be convinced it'll blow up at any second. I'll be surprised if she even lets me get my learner's permit this year." He affected a high-pitched voice. " *Do you know how many people die in cars every year, Eddie?* " He sighed. "I've been saving up the money Mr. Hanlon pays us. It's not much but maybe if I give Mr. Laughton a down payment he'll let me pay the rest in installments. But then I wouldn't have anywhere to put the car."

"Hey Mike, would your dad let Eddie keep a car on the farm?" Bev asked.

"I'm not sure," Mike said. "If Eddie had his mom's permission, probably. But I don't know if he'd allow it if she didn't know."

"Bummer."

"Are you s-saving up for a c-car when you turn 16?" Bill asked him.

Mike shook his head. "My dad's going to give me the old farm truck and get himself a new one when I'm old enough. I've already driven it around plenty, so I'm pretty good with it."

Eddie boggled at him. "You can already *drive* ?!"

Mike grinned. "Yeah."

"So why the hell aren't we halfway to Bangor right now?" Richie demanded. "Mikey, man, you've been holding out on us."

"I'm only allowed to drive it on the farm and with my dad riding shotgun," Mike explained. "I've only been on a real road twice."

"Holy shit, that's amazing," Eddie said.

Mike couldn't help feeling a large amount of pride at his friends' astonishment. He knew he was lucky to have his parents, that they weren't like the other parents in town. The more he heard stories from his friends, the more feverishly glad he was to be a Hanlon. The Denbroughs and Urises were nice in a cardboard-y, cookie-cutter-white-folks sort of way. Sonia Kaspbrak was just insane. Mrs. Hanscom was exceedingly accommodating, but Mike knew Ben wished she was around more. Bev's dad...well, they didn't talk about

him much. Richie's parents were the only ones almost as cool as Mike's. Still, he wouldn't trade his dad for Richie's kooky, off-the-wall family life in a million years.

Will was a practical man. That's why he'd taught Mike to drive at age 13, using their big, empty corn field as a place to start. "You'll be driving for real soon enough," he'd explained at the time. "Might as well have as much practice under your belt as possible. Too many of these kids only get a couple months of practice, then they're out on the road raising hell 'cause they don't know how to handle a car. Going too fast, not paying attention to hazards, gettin' themselves or someone else killed. You gotta know how to drive in any type of weather, Mike."

"Yes, Daddy," Mike had replied obediently.

"You're a good boy," Will had said. He said that a lot. Mike followed his father's instructions and advice to the letter because he had no reason not to. His father was a fair man, even when he was lecturing or handing down a punishment -- which he rarely had to do because for the most part, Mike wouldn't dream of disrespecting or defying his father.

As the talk about dream cars turned to whether or not they'd be getting a car by the time they were sixteen, the Losers subtly snooped around the barn. Mike poked around right with them. The storage barn was mostly full of boring equipment or supplies, but every once in a while they would stumble over something unusual or downright weird. More than once they had discovered a young or injured animal. Very few of the objects stored here were broken down or useless - Will believed that there was no place on a farm for something that didn't earn its keep. A few things might be waiting for repair or out of season, but everything else was in working order.

Occasionally Ben or Eddie would find something to tinker with. Ben might find some scrap wood to build or repair something with, like the time he designed a better chicken coop door. Eddie was more into the mechanical pieces, poking around on the tractor or baler. The others just dicked around, careful not to break anything important. They respected Will, and nobody -- not even Richie "Trashmouth" Tozier -- wanted to be on his bad side.

Richie climbed up on an old bale of hay. “Hey Bev, wanna roll in the hay with me?”

Bev gave him a shove. “When are you going to come up with a new joke? You say that every time.”

Richie laughed. “Ouch. Okay, Eds, wanna roll in the hay with me?”

Eddie and Stan were busy messing around with a tarp that covered up part of the barn wall, not really paying attention to the others’ antics. “Uh huh,” Eddie replied vaguely, flapping a hand at Richie. “In a minute.”

Bev snort-laughed at the dumbfounded look on Richie’s face. Mike grinned. “Silent is a good look on you,” he teased.

Richie shook his head hard, as if to dispel some unwanted mental image. “Well shit,” he said. “Eds got off a good one and he doesn’t even know it.”

“Mike, what’s under this tarp?” Stan asked. The others drifted closer to look.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. He couldn’t remember ever not seeing the tarp right in that spot, covering up something rectangular and flat that leaned against the wall. He’d never questioned its existence before, but now that he thought about it, it was a little weird that it had been there for so long. Things weren’t usually allowed to languish on the Hanlon farm. He suddenly felt a little nervous.

“Can we look?” Eddie asked. “Would your dad be mad?”

Mike shook his head, although he wasn’t sure. If this was something Will wanted Mike to know about, he would have told him. On the other hand, why leave it out in the open if it was something private?

Mike suddenly became aware of Bill watching him rather intently. “I don’t think he’d be mad,” Mike said, though his voice wavered slightly. Still, no one moved. So Mike reached out and pushed the tarp aside.

Eddie let out a small gasp. Stan choked.

Underneath the tarp was a window. A large, broken window. There was a spider-webbing hole in the upper right corner pane where something - perhaps a fist-sized rock - had flown through it with some amount of force. But that wasn't what drew their eyes. Under the hole, spreading out across the rest of the intact panes, was a dark-red, nearly black swastika.

"What the fuuuuuuuuuuck," Richie breathed out.

"M-mike?" Bill asked. They all looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

He didn't have one.

He should cover it up. He should bury it behind the lesser-used farm equipment, the stuff that his father only dragged out a couple times a year. No, not good enough. He should dig a giant hole in the middle of the farm and chuck it in, let it rot away and the paint disintegrate into nothing. Or better yet, chuck it into the house on Neibolt Street, let it take its place with the source of all evil in Derry.

No, not all evil. Only the metaphysical kind. It wasn't a killer clown that put this swastika here.

Mike didn't know how long they stood there, not moving, while his thoughts tumbled. The others were waiting for him to say something -- anything -- to break the frozen moment. When nothing was forthcoming, a small noise from Stan startled them all back into reality.

Mike looked at him. Stan's lips twitched and his eyes were overly bright. He looked like he might cry or scream.

Nobody knew what to say. Which was Richie's cue to break the silence. "Soooo, your dad hates Jews, huh?"

"Beep beep," Eddie snapped, punching Richie in the ribs.

Mike shook his head so hard something in his neck cracked. "No. No way. No, my dad doesn't - my dad..."

Stan grit his teeth. "The swastika wasn't only used to target Jews,

dickwad. It was anyone who didn't fit Hitler's idea of perfect humanity."

"Cripples," Eddie added.

"Gypsies," Bev piped up.

"Jehovah's W-Witnesses and other r-religions," Bill said.

"Anyone who wasn't white," Mike finished.

"Didn't you listen to anything Mr. Simmons said in Social Studies?" Stan snapped.

"Yeah, that's why I'm confused," Richie exclaimed, gesturing emphatically at the glass. "Why the *fuck* does Mike's dad have a swastika just chilling in his barn?"

"I...I don't know," Mike admitted. It didn't make any sense. He couldn't stop staring at the blood-red paint. There were a few places where it had dripped, leaving little smears.

"C-cover it b-b-b-back up," Bill told him quietly.

Mike followed his glance to Stan, who was chalk white and swaying slightly. His fists were balled up tight at his sides and his face so pinched it looked painful. Like Mike, he couldn't seem to take his eyes off the offending symbol, even when chewing out Richie. Mike let the tarp fall back into place.

Bev placed a comforting hand on Stan's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Stan jerked away from her touch. "No! No, I'm not okay!" He glared at Mike. "How can you be so calm about this?"

Mike shrugged. "My dad isn't a Nazi. I don't know why this is here but he must have a reason for it."

Stan didn't say anything to that, but his look was clear: he didn't want to hear any *reason* .

When nothing else was forthcoming except Stan's silent rage, Bill

finally took a step away from the covered window. “L-let’s go to the qu-qu-quarry,” he suggested.

The others agreed quickly, except Stan and Mike who were locked in a silent stare-down. Mike looked away first. The moment passed and they followed the others out the barn door to grab their bikes.

The ride to the quarry was almost completely silent. Even Richie was as quiet as he could be, although he did try a few times to get the others to laugh. He stuck close to Stan. Stan, for his part, looked less and less like he was going to have an aneurysm.

As they parked their bikes and began wiggling out of their clothes, Richie suddenly blurted out, “I don’t get it, man. None of us would’ve made the ‘perfect human’ list but we aren’t going all rabid about some stupid thing that means nothing. Hitler’s dead, we won. It’s no big deal.”

Stan closed his eyes as if praying for strength against the likes of Richie Tozier. “Did any of your family die in the Holocaust, Richie?”

“No, but neither did yours. Your grandparents and parents all live here,” Richie said.

Stan shook his head. “My mom’s parents still had family over there. They lost siblings and nieces and nephews.”

“People you never would have met,” Richie said.

“That doesn’t matter,” Stan said. He looked at each of them. “Yeah, maybe Eddie would have been killed because of his asthma and Bev because of her hair and Mike because of his skin. But I’m not talking about ‘what if’ here. I mean literally: my family died because of that stupid symbol. Maybe your dad didn’t draw it on the window. In fact, I’m sure he didn’t. But he *kept* it. Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know,” Mike said. “But I’m sure he had a reason.”

Stan didn’t look convinced. Mike didn’t know what else to say. Bill gave them a tentative smile, like he hoped this was the end of the

subject.

“L-last one in the wuh-water is a p-p-pussy.”

There was a mad dash for the quarry at those words, followed by a lot of splashing and games of chicken. If anyone noticed Mike didn't have much to say, they didn't mention it. He wasn't much of a talker anyway.

Dinner was a quiet affair at the Hanlon table that night. That was hardly unusual, since Will was exhausted after a long day of work and Mike was lost in his own thoughts. He desperately wanted to ask his father about the window, but dinner was not the right time or place.

Mike helped his mother clear away the dishes after dessert, watching his father retreat to the living room from the corner of his eye. The second his mother dismissed him with a kiss on the cheek, he followed his father's footsteps and found Will sitting in his recliner, feet propped up, the television turned to a rerun of Perry Mason. Mike faltered. His heart pounded. He didn't want to disturb his father's only time of day to relax.

But...

“Daddy?”

“What is it, Mikey?”

Mike slipped into the room and perched on the edge of the loveseat. His hands twisted in his lap. “Daddy, my friends and I were taking a break in the storage barn this afternoon and we sort of stumbled on something.”

Will muted the television and gave his son his full attention. “Were you snooping, son?”

“No, Daddy. Well, a little. But we didn't mean to.”

“Mm,” Will said. He didn't seem inclined to be angry yet, just

gathering facts and confessions like ripe cherries falling into his palm with the slightest tug. "What did you find out there?"

"A-a window," Mike said. "Broken. And it had...it had a... um... a swastika painted on it." The word stuck in his throat and he felt dirty, like he'd just said a swear word to his father.

Still, Will didn't give any emotion away. He just continued to look at Mike steadily. "Did you, now?"

"Yes, Daddy."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Mike felt like it was his turn to speak again, but he didn't know what to say. He wished his father would say something - anything. Finally Will continued, "Is that all you needed to tell me?"

"Yes, sir. Well, actually...no. I also have a question?" Mike's inflection rose at the end, uncertain, ready to backpedal.

"Do you or don't you?"

Mike steeled his resolve. "I do."

"You may ask."

"Why did you...I mean why not.... Why is it still there?"

Will considered his son carefully. "You're getting to be a young man now, Mikey. You hear what I tell you about the folks in town, you know some of my history with some of the lower folks, like that Butch Bowers. Why do you think I kept that devil's symbol on my property all these years? And I can tell you, it has been many years. You were just a bit of a thing when that window was broken and defaced."

Mike shook his head. "I've been trying to think of a reason all day and I can't. And my friend Stan was really upset when he saw it."

"That's the Uris boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well now, that's understandable." Will shifted position. "I never did figure out who left that present for me. It was in the middle of winter some - oh - ten years or so ago now. It was a garage window, thank God. Otherwise we could have near froze to death in our sleep, it was that cold out. I had my suspicions, of course, but no proof. The police were mad as hell, but there was nothing they could do about it."

"They were mad?" Mike asked, surprised. Since when did the local police care if a black person's property got defaced?

"Sure they were." Will rubbed his chin. "Some of the boys on the force back then had fought in World War II themselves. And even those who didn't, who weren't born until after the war was over, still know that the swastika is about as unAmerican as you can get. Sure they were mad. To have some facist Nazi running around town painting unAmerican symbols on law-abiding citizens' windows is not the sort of thing any patriot would tolerate, even in this town. But they couldn't do anything if they didn't know who put it there."

"But that doesn't explain why you kept it," Mike pointed out.

"You still can't imagine why?"

"No, sir."

"I kept it as a reminder to myself that evil might lie low and won't confront you to your face, but it's still there, lurking and awaiting. You ain't never know when it'll strike, but it will strike."

"But it was hidden in a corner," Mike said before he could stop himself. It wasn't like him to contradict his father, but it just didn't make any *sense* to him.

"That is true, son. Hidden away from view but never completely out of my mind, just like those who would hurt people like us." Will sat back in his chair. "Do you understand now, Mikey?"

Mike opened his mouth to say, "yes, sir," even though he didn't understand at all. Because that was the way of his household. His father was sometimes unfathomable to his sensibilities, but he was too agreeable to ever say no. Things that hadn't made sense to him as

a child now shone with clarity, even if he didn't always like what it meant for his freedom. This, he thought, was like that: unimaginable now but would make sense to him once he'd ventured farther into the world and witnessed the evil his father talked about for himself.

Except...no.

Mike knew evil. He had encountered it in its purest form for himself. He had looked into the face of pure malice and stood up to it. He didn't need to keep a souvenir to remind himself that it existed and that it might come for the children of Derry again. He didn't need a picture of Pennywise or any of It's disguises to tell him to be vigilant.

He just knew.

They all knew.

Stan knew.

So the words that came out of his mouth were ones he could not remember uttering before: "No, Daddy. No, I don't understand at all."

Will's eyes flicked back to the television. "You will, son," he said. It wasn't condescending, exactly, but certainly dismissive.

"I won't."

Will turned his attention back to Mike, interested. He wasn't the sort who bristled at having his authority challenged, but then again Mike wasn't the sort to ever challenge him before. Mike wasn't sure how his father would react if he pushed further. "No? Why not?"

"Because..." Mike struggled to grasp the ineffable and wrangle it into words. "Because when you keep a pocket of evil in your heart, you let it continue to exist in the world instead of smashing it out of existence."

"The evil still exists, whether I allow it to or not."

"Yes. I know that." Boy did he. "But...but if someone has the opportunity to destroy evil, shouldn't they?"

“The symbol itself isn’t evil, son,” Will said gently. “It’s only the meaning that humans apply to it that makes it evil or not.”

Mike felt unmoored, disconnected from himself and his own thoughts. His father made sense - on the surface. But this went deeper than just the surface. “That’s...that’s true. That makes sense. But...” But what? His reasoning floundered. All he could think about was Stan’s anger at seeing the swastika, his fury at their hypothetical deaths when his family had suffered in reality.

“If we don’t learn from our history, we are doomed to repeat it, Mikey,” Will said. “Do you understand now?”

Like every 27 years, he wanted to ask. Don’t you know you’re just as complicit? Don’t you see that there are more evil things than Nazis and racists? Don’t you understand now? But he couldn’t say any of that. All he could do was shake his head. “I know evil exists, Daddy. Better than you think I do.” His father looked at him sharply at that - wondering what Mike hadn’t told him about. Mike would let him wonder. Whatever he thought wouldn’t even come close to the truth. “But I don’t need a broken window to remind me of that every day. I don’t want something that’s going to overshadow every day on the farm, every interaction, every conversation. That window in the barn is like carrying a piece of the evil around in my mind for as long as it exists. I don’t want that. And it hurt my friend. I don’t like that. So, no. I don’t understand you and I don’t think I will.”

Will didn’t say anything for a long moment, digesting what his son said. Mike couldn’t quite look him in the eye, scared of what he would find there. He focused on his own hands instead, willing them not to fidget, trying to control their shaking.

At last Will nodded slightly. “That’s how you feel, son. I’m glad you told me.”

Mike waited for more, but that was it. Will turned his attention back to the television and unmuted it. Mike lingered for another minute before finally giving up and heading to his room. He knew his father wasn’t one for many words, but he had been expecting a little more...what? An apology? A promise? Mike didn’t know for sure, yet he knew he left the conversation feeling even more hollow than when

it began.

It was several days before Mike had any reason to venture into the storage barn again to dig out an extra bag of chicken feed. His eyes wandered unwillingly to the corner where he and his friends had found the window.

It was gone.

Chore abandoned for the moment, Mike searched every inch of the barn he could reach, but the window was nowhere to be found. It was gone without a trace, as if it had never been there. Puzzled, Mike hefted the seed onto his shoulder and went to where his father was tending to the hens.

“Took you awhile, son.”

“I got distracted,” Mike admitted. “I’m sorry, sir.”

Will cut open the feed and poured some out for the chickens, who clucked with excitement. “Don’t go searching for things you won’t find, Mikey. You’ll only waste your time and mine and these here chickens’.”

Mike gaped at his father, who was starting to look a little impatient. “You got rid of it?”

“A very smart man recently told me sometimes holding on to hateful things hurts more than it heals,” Will said.

What man? Mike almost asked before realizing Will meant *him*. He didn’t know what to say. “Th-thank you,” was all he managed to stammer out.

“Don’t thank me for doing what I should have done years ago. Just get a move on. The cows won’t milk themselves.”

Mike continued on to his next chore feeling that something had shifted in the world. He didn’t know what it was yet, nor did he know quite what it would mean. He expected he would find out soon

enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

For context, in case anyone feels the need to correct my portrayal of a Jewish person's take on the Holocaust, I am culturally Jewish and have recently started going to Synagogue. My grandfather tried to get his family out of Poland but couldn't. I welcome discussion but am wary about anyone who might say Stan is wrong or overreacting.